



Somerville College

Rebecca Whitaker (Academic Office Administrator) sat down with two tutors who are involved with the admissions process to find out what the Oxford interviews are all about.

RW: Where did you go to school and did you study at Oxford?

Dr Natalia Nowakowska, Tutor in History: I went to Tiffins Girl's school in Kingston upon Thames, a state grammar school, and studied History at Lincoln College, Oxford. So I am in fact now teaching the same degree course that I studied myself.

Dr Matt Higgins, Tutor in Biochemistry: I went to High Storres School for 6th Form, a Comprehensive School in Sheffield, and then studied at Christ's College, Cambridge.

RW: What was your experience of interviews – has the format changed much?

NN: It's difficult to say, because the process has always differed slightly between colleges. But one major difference is that when I was interviewed, the Oxford entrance exam still existed; so I had two interviews at Lincoln and at least one of them was based on what I had written in the entrance exam.

RW: What did the entrance exam consist of?

NN: There were two papers – one was in effect a mock A level and one was a more conceptual paper. Nowadays, we use A level written work and HAT test instead of the old 6 hour entrance exam.

MH: I only applied to one college at Cambridge, and had three interviews and no written test. Two were subject based and one with the Senior Tutor who interviewed everyone!

RW: How should someone prepare for an interview?

NN: Do you mean after they are invited?

RW: No, I mean, anyone who has thought of applying to Oxford – what should they do to give themselves a chance of being invited and impressing once they are here?

MH: It's very important to work seriously to get good exam grades and set goals to meet. GCSE's do matter when tutors are deciding who to invite for interview and in deciding who to offer places to. Having said that, however, applicants shouldn't be put off from applying if their GCSE's aren't the best in the school as we assess each person as an individual. In preparing for interviews it's also very important that they arrive willing to be asked questions that they may not know the answer to. They shouldn't be intimidated by that, as none of the people interviewed will know the answers to all of the questions.

NN: Yes – I agree with Matt.

MH: We also try to use contextualised GCSE grades. In other words, the marks a candidate gets are set against those from the other students in their type of school. It's one way of trying to put all candidates on a level playing field. What we're trying to find is a candidate's innate ability and their ability to benefit from the course, independent of their background.

NN: Being really engaged with your schoolwork is one of the most important ways you can prepare for an Oxford interview, and an Oxford degree. If you are able to discuss history in class, or with friends outside the classroom, that's good preparation too, because what we are looking for is active, critical engagement with the subject. If you can pursue your historical interests by going to exhibitions, watching TV programmes, visiting local historical sites that can be beneficial too – but

only if you've thought about what you've seen/heard carefully, and are able to talk about it in an analytical way.

MH: We want to see that the candidates know what they are signing up for. In applying for Biochemistry, they should take opportunities to visit research labs and do some work experience. We want to see they have thought about what the course is going to bring, and they have properly considered why they want to do that course, and not something else. Enthusiasm is very important – you've got to love the subject or you won't have a good time. There's a lot of work in the course here, so doing something you've only got a partial interest in won't be helpful.

NN: Many A Levels focus on modern history (i.e. twentieth century), but the Oxford degree requires you to study medieval and early modern history too so you've got to be aware of that before you begin. That's why it's a good idea to get a flavour of other periods if possible – and you can do that not just by reading monographs and textbooks, but by visiting historical sites and buildings, thinking about art from different periods, reading historical novels.

MH: It's always good to know that the candidate has considered why they want to take this particular course at Oxford. For Biochemistry applicants, I'd want to know why Biochemistry rather than Biology for example – and why our course rather than one from a different University.

NN: And it's important to think through why you want to do this course, at this university.

MH: I try to ask a couple of general questions to start the interview with to ease candidates in and help them to get talking and relax a bit. Interviews are bound to be a bit scary but the Tutors really want to help people to do their best.

NN: It's always worth finding out what your interviewers' area of expertise is before the interview.

MH: But don't claim their speciality is what you're most interested in, just to prove you know who they are!

RW: *Candidates are often afraid of making a mistake whilst being interviewed and it being a deal breaker.*

MH: But they shouldn't be afraid of not knowing an answer or asking questions. The interview is a two way conversation and we know that different people will come with different knowledge, having been taught different things or learned different things for themselves.

NN: Being challenged is a good thing, and that goes both ways – a candidate can challenge a tutor. The interview is like a mock tutorial, and two way discussion is a key part of tutorials.

MH: It's also fine to admit if there's a word you don't know, or if the question is confusing. The interview isn't testing knowledge so much as the ability to reason and to engage with the subject. We don't expect candidates to know everything already. Candidates should be aware that tutors want them to do their best and to get the most out of the interview experience.

NN: That's why we push them during the interview – it may not be a comfortable experience but we're testing their boundaries, and looking at how far they can move beyond them – out of their comfort zones.

MH: We're trying to help them distinguish themselves. I always start an interview from the same point, but they can go off in different directions, depending on their answers.

NN: Yes, there's a basic template from which we start, but no two interviews are ever the same. The interview is shaped by the candidate's interests and responses. We'll always help if they get stuck – we'll rephrase questions, or approach the question from a different angle

MH: They also shouldn't be afraid of talking about why they are stuck. The more they communicate the better! Thinking out aloud is good in an interview!

RW: *What is the interview designed to assess that can't be seen from the UCAS form and/or written work?*

NN: Teachability!

MH: Biochemistry, and most of the other sciences, don't have tests or written work, so we use the interview to assess their ability to take novel ideas and reason through them – the abilities

they will need as an academic really! Their grades more reflect their ability to reproduce the knowledge they have already been taught rather than showing their ability to reason through new material or solve problems.

NN: The interview is designed to test an applicant's capacity for independent thought, originality and historical imagination. Many Oxford history tutors feel that those skills are not necessarily the ones which A-Level exams privilege

MH: I guess that the UCAS form can only hint at enthusiasm for the subject. In the interview we can also test that a bit more too. The great thing about the interview system is that we can treat everyone as a complete individual, get to know them a bit and see how they respond to the academically challenging approach which they would have on the course here. Without the interview we'd just be doing a numerical ranking based on the application form. With it we can treat people as people, test their abilities and take their circumstances into account more too. It takes a lot of the Tutors time and we think really hard about the decisions, but it is worth the effort to give people a fair chance of getting a place here.

RW: *Applicants often worry about the fact they might be deliberately caught out by a question – does this happen?*

NN: We'd never ask a deliberately misleading or 'trick' question. There would be no point, because the aim is not to catch candidates out, but to help them demonstrate their capacity for analytical thought as best we can.

MH: I might ask a question where they didn't factually know the answer, but only as a means of starting a conversation that would lead them to discovering the answer.

NN: It's a discussion, so you can move through a series of questions to find the answer together. In that sense, interviews are collaborative.

MH: : It's sometimes important to allow a candidate get to a dead end in a train of thought, so they can find for themselves that the answer isn't in that direction. That can really help people to find the real answers – although it might feel as though they have made a mistake and be uncomfortable at the time!

NN: It's also ok to change your mind in the interview, and say so. Lightbulb moments are good, where you suddenly see the issues in a whole new way!

MH: Changing our minds when we learn new things is what all good academics do too!

RW: *Once an interview has happened does that form the sole basis for an offer, or do things like GCSE marks still matter?*

MH: The interview is important, of course, but there are other factors. In Biochemistry we rank applicants using three scores – one is based on the UCAS form, and 2 on their interviews. This gives a numerical ranking of everyone and is heavily used in the final decision. But Tutors are free to offer a place to someone from lower down the ranking, especially if it was something on the UCAS form that pulls the ranking down and we can see a reason after the interview why maybe their grades weren't as good as someone else's. We really agonise over these decisions and we have freedom to use discretion if we have a good reason!

NN: Each subject uses slightly different processes to arrive at its ranking. In History, for example, we use the HAT test score, GCSE results, written work and interview score to rank candidates against one another,

MH: But across the board, tutors can take someone from a further down the ranking list. There's occasionally a very good reason to take someone who is not ranked too highly. GCSE's are taken into account in the ranking, so if you're reading this and have yet to do your exams – do as well as you can! Having said that, if you're reading this with GCSE's already done, and you haven't done as well as you'd like, don't let this put you off applying. It's just one part of the puzzle!

RW: Is there anything else you think people should know?

NN: Candidates often wonder whether it makes a difference which college you apply to. The short answer is not really. Subjects have different (and complex) mechanisms in place to make sure that everyone has the best possible chance of getting a place, whichever college you apply to. This might mean, for example, that if College X has a huge surge in applications for History in a given year, some of those candidates will be redistributed to other colleges.

MH: In Biochemistry we have system where people are also interviewed at a second College in addition to their first choice. Colleges with a smaller number of first choice applicants get more second choice people to interview. It is a way in which we try to get rid of the randomness of College choices. We want to reduce the chance that getting a place at Oxford is made less likely by choosing a really popular College.

NN: The other thing applicants should be aware of, and which should hopefully find encouraging, is how much effort the tutors put into the admissions period. It comes at the end of a very hectic term – the freshers have all arrived and most tutors have very heavy teaching loads in the autumn term. But throughout that term we are engaging with admissions, reading forms, marking written work and HAT tests, making interview arrangements. We take the interviews very seriously, and put a lot of emotional energy into it, and are acutely aware of how huge a responsibility it is to make admissions decisions.

MH: All the applicants should remember we're trying to help them perform at their very best!

NN: One of the things that was so striking in History interviews in the last admissions round was how many candidates said they had enjoyed the interview process. They said that they had found the material and issues discussed stimulating, and that even if they didn't get a place in the end, they would've learned a lot from it. It may be stressful, but it's a positive experience too!